DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 664 CS 211 796

AUTHOR Hamilton, William H., Jr.
TITLE Dust Tracks on a Road: A View from the Audience.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (40th, Seattle, WA, March 16-18, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Authors; *Autobiographies; *Black Literature; Literary Criticism; Literary Styles; Literature Appreciation
IDENTIFIERS *Dust Tracks on a Road (Hurston); *Hurston (Zora Neale); Womens Literature

ABSTRACT

"Dust Tracks on a Road," author Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, is not a typical black autobiography. Hurston is a complex woman and author who addresses both black and white audiences, shifting the cadences of her voice to invoke a readership that can hear the textures of many voices and respond to an underlying call to a world where race is a prominent feature of the landscape, but not the major or only landmark. Hurston does not want to be pigeonholed on the subject of the "race problem." Yet race is such a salient feature of Hurston's persona as a black female author in the 1930s that she is obliged to comment on it. Carefully dropping ethnic and racial semantic cues, Hurston universally condemns racial and ethnic braggadocio, and narrows her sympathizers to whoever can drop race pride of any sort from their lexicons. Despite this position, Hurston has pride in her roots, as evidenced in folk tales of the rural South which she relates with a voice that beckons those hungry for both the apocryphal and the authentic. Some of her most reverent language is reserved for her education at Morgan College and Howard University. Certain critics argue that Hurston's autobiography fails to explore the private motives that led to her public success. Yet a strong woman does not require an explicit reference to anything but her own work in order to articulate her sense of self. (MM)

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DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD: A VIEW FROM THE AUDIENCE

by
William H. Hamilton, Jr.

Jefferson Community College
March 16, 1989

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DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD: A VIEW FROM THE AUDIENCE

Zora Neale Hurston makes you see a little black girl on a country road, barefoot and beaming. The girl is Hurston herself, and from her perch on the gatepost, she has just hailed a passing motorist on the way through Eatonville, headed for Orlando, just as she described it in her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road. Part daredevil, part lunatic, she rides a half mile down the road, then remembers the whipping she is signing up for if she comes up missing at suppertime. She gets out of the car, and returns to the house to this greeting from her grandmother.

> (She writes:) "Git offa dat gatepost. You li'l sow, you! Git down! Setting up dere looking dem white folks right in de face! They's gowine to lynch you, yet. And don't stand in dat doorway gazing out at 'em neither. Youse too brazen to live long" (46).

In many ways, Hurston retained the defiance of that little girl on the gatepost. She didn't conform to what Robert Hemenway, her major biographer, expected of her autobiography. She didn't conform to what Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison expected of the most prominent black woman writer of their time. Wright said Hurston "pandered to a condescending white readership," and Ellison claimed that her work was "socially unconscious" (Gates, 45).

Quoting Stephen Butterfield, a student of black autobiography, Hemenway writes in Zora Neale Hurston that black autobiography is (quote)"...both a bid for freedom and an attempt

to communicate what whites have done. Normally it is characterized by political awareness, empathy for suffering, knowledge of oppression, and a sense of shared life, shared triumph, and communal responsibility." "Almost none of these criteria applies entirely to Dust Tracks," Hemenway writes (278).

What emerges from Dust Tracks, therefore, is not typical black autobiography, but an account of a woman part folk hero, part Barnard scholar who, like a little girl on a country road, hails passersby and rides with them part of the way. She is a complex woman and complex author who addresses both black and white audiences, shifting the cadences of her voice to invoke a readership that can hear the textures of many voices and respond to an underlying call to a world where race is a prominent feature of the landscape, but not the major or the only landmark. It is that skill with words, her capacity as wordsmith, that throws readers off the track and finally derails them if they are looking for an author easily pigeonholed. Hurston keeps us at arm's length, dropping what Lunsford and Ede call "syntactic and semantic cues" to let us come nearer to her meaning and the audience she invokes.

Most of all, Hurston does not want to be pigeonholed on the subject of "the race problem." In the final chapter of the original edition of Dust Tracks, Hurston writes, "When I see what we are really like, I know that God is too great an artist for we folks on my side of the creek to be all of His best works.

Some of his finest touches are among us, without doubt, but some more of His masterpieces are among those folks who live over the creek" (281). Yet race is such a salient feature of Hurston's personna as a black female author in the 1930s, that she is obliged to comment on it. In a strong, polemical style, she slices in several directions at once at race braggarts in this excerpt originally deleted from the first edition: (She writes):

> After all, the word "race" is a loose classification of physical characteristics. It tells nothing about the insides of people. Pointing at achievements tells nothing either. Races have never done anything. What seems race achievement is the work of individuals. The white race did not go into a laboratory and invent incandescent light. That was Edison. The Jews did not work out Relativity. That was Einstein. The Negroes did not find out the inner secrets of peanuts and sweet potatoes, nor the secret of the development of the egg. That was Carver and Just. If you are under the impression that every white man is an Edison, just look around a bit. If you have the idea that every Negro is a Carver, you had better take off plenty of time to do your searching.
>
> No, instead of Race Pride being a virtue, it is a sapping vice. It has caused more suffering in the world than religious opinion, and that is saying a lot (325).

Here Hurston is invoking the man or woman, black or white, who can see that very colorful, differentiated landscape of individuals, not groups, who achieve. Lunsford and Ede remind us that the central task of a writer is "to use semantic and syntactic cues to help define the roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to a text" (160). By that standard, Hurston's audience of sympathetic blacks had to be very small.

Race pride, Negritude, the motto of the Harlem Renaissance, was still in vogue in the age when Hurston wrote. Luminaries like Alaine Locke, Marcus Garvey, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Robeson had called Black America to stand up, and New Deal Democrats were being challenged to respond. As Gates reported, Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison regarded her fiction as "counterrevolutionary," and would likely have seen her unpublished attack on Negritude the same way. They counter-attacked what they called the "minstrel technique" in her fiction and could very likely have regarded her life story and this polemic with no more sympathy.

Yet Hurston evenly distributes her diatribe against racial chauvinism. In an era of menacing Nazism, she is quick to remind Jews that there is no collective credit for Einstein's work, and for white Americans, no glory in Edison's. Carefully dropping ethnic and racial semantic cues, Hurston universally condemns racial and ethnic braggadoccio, and narrows her sympathizers to whoever can drop race pride of any sort from their lexicons. The paradox? Hurston had plenty of pride--in individuals regardless of race, whether they were characters like Janie Starks of Their Eyes Were Watching God or of flesh and blood comrades like Ethel Waters and Fannie Hurst, teachers at Morgan, Howard, and Barnard, or anyone who exemplified the glories of individual effort.

In helping us see how Hurston tries to invoke an audience,

scholar Kenneth Burke's concept of identification is helpful. It is an "I am like you" technique used by an author to enhance the traditional concept of persuasion. Burke wrote, "We might well keep in mind that a speaker persuades an audience by use of stylistic identification; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests and the speaker draws on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience" (46).

In this light, Hurston shifts between "I am like my characters in the Florida backwater," and "I am also like those regal women of the Seven Sister Schools." She is like both groups, certainly, in the sense that she can project their languages, and that upon hearing them, you must fall somewhere in the spectrum of an audience that understands the textures of her voice. That range must also include the language of the black bourgeoisie that attended colleges like Howard University in the Age of Negritude.

We can hear Hurston calling on her roots in the folk tales of the rural South with a voice that beckons those hungry for both the apocryphal and the authentic. The conclusion of the story of "Sis Snail" and its message of slow, useless men could be the "minstrel technique" that Brown, Wright, and Ellison condemned, but that certainly a folklorist would treasure. (She writes:)

> So I laid there in de bed and waited for him to git de doctor. Lawd! I was so sick! I rolled from pillar to post. After seven I heard a noise at de door, and I said, "Lawd, I'm so glad! I knows dats my husband done come back wid de doctor.' So I hollered out and asked, 'Honey, is dat you done come back wid de doctor? And he came growling at me and giving me a short answer wid, 'Don't try to rush me. I ain't gone yet!' It had done took him seven years to git his hat and git to de door. So I just up and left him" (66).

The language here sparks a reminiscence of a more innocent time. Like a private joke, it is meant to mimic the painfully slow deliberations of stereotypes like Lightnin' and Step'n Fetchit, played in Hollywood Grade "B" race movies by Mantain Moreland and Willie Best. Yet by 1942, the times were not so innocent. War was brewing abroad, and in some ways, blacks at home were also at war. Where the tale may have meant to delight, it must have seemed trivial or worse to a man like Richard Wright who described interracial violence on the South Side of Chicago in Native Son. Yet the voice of "Sis Snail" is one of amusement at a tradition of goldbricking among blacks dating back to slavery. In that reminiscence, Hurston attaches herself to her birthplace among common folk. In the telling, she insists on the pride of anthropological folklore, whether it is complimentary to the "New Negro" or not.

Hurston had plenty of pride in her roots. Some of her most reverent language is reserved for her education at Morgan College, and later at Howard University, the greatest black university in the world: (She writes:)

> I shall never forget my first college assembly, sitting there in the chapel of that great university. I was so exalted that I said to the spirit of Howard, "You have taken me in. I am a tiny bit of your greatness. I swear to you that I shall never make you ashamed of me."
>
> It did not wear off. Every time I sat there as a part and parcel of things, looking up there at the platform crowded with faculty members, the music, the hundreds of students about me, it would come down on me again (157).

If any black person of any intellectual pretension wants to endear himself to black readers, the way to do it is to invoke Howard. It's the same as John F. Kennedy invoking Harvard. It works. No doubt Hurston reserved a special place for Howard in her autobiography because, as a talented black person, a connection to Howard is a special distinction. The repetition of "great" and "greatness", the use of the words "exalted" and "spirit" are all reverential terms, giving some idea of the special efforts she made to pay homage to a black institution. It's a little sermonette, this testimony, appropriate to church-going blacks, who understand this tribute as a call to rise.

There is some irony, then, in the identification Hurston made with her patrons at Barnard. From folk wit, to black bourgeois tribute, she arrives at the sort of description of Mrs. R. Osgood Mason that should be read through a lorgnette. She writes:

> My relations with Godmother were curious. Laugh if you will, but there was and is a psychic bond between us. She could read my mind, not only when I was in her presence, but thousands of miles away. Both Max Eastman and Richmond Barthe have told me that she could do the same with them. But the thing that delighted

> her was the fact that I was her only Godchild who could read her thoughts at a distance. Her old fingers were cramped and she could not write, but in her friend Cornelia Chapin's exact script, a letter would find me in Alabama, or Florida, or in the Bahama Islands and lay me by the heels for what I was thinking (176).

There is a reverential air here, too, but it is quite different from the praise for Howard. Adjectives like "curious" verbs like "delighted" are the language of the elite. The text itself, in the dropping of the names Eastman, Barthe, and Chapin suggest a connection to wealth and status. These are not the surnames of Eatonville, or even of black bourgeois society. The "psychic bond" to this rich woman is a strong identification to power. The connection is more than psychic; it reveals Hurston's attachment to privilege. The audience identifying with these references might not be inclined to put Hurston in the same crowd with them, but they would certainly understand the affectation. If in Hurston's chapter on friendship there is a significant range, in modesty, at least, between Fannie Hurst and Ethel Waters, there is certainly some connection, or identification, that these are two people who "count."

For some of her critics, however, Dust Tracks does not satisfy. There is a silent voice on so many areas that beg a voice. What about the role of black women? What about the mathematical puzzle of her age? For Robert Hemenway, Dust Tracks fails. In Hemenway's words, "It fails as an autobiography because it is a text deliberately less than its author's talents, a text diminshed by her refusal to provide a second or third dimension

to the flat surface of her adult image. Hurston avoided any exploration of the private motives that led to her public success" (xxxix). Yet the missing parts titillate. Taking the facts of the founding of Eatonville with the fiction of the hamlet that Joe Starks gets underway in Their Eyes, the audience is left to shape the context of both accounts. A strong woman may not require an explicit reference to anything but her own work in order to articulate her sense of self.

In Hurston's own voice, the origins of Eatonville became like tyring "to hit a straight lick with a crooked stick" (3). Perhaps as a subject of her own research, she may have felt compromised to have to justify her own individualism. A straight lick with a crooked stick? It would seem the alternative would be to let the unsaid dialogue and the unseen audience fill in their own blanks.

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William H. Hamilton, Jr.
Jefferson Community College

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